

Ike Mitken.

5 - 1 digger - one off haulage - organized
- the courtyard

When were you born?

In 1910.

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And what did your parents do?

My father was a miner. His father came here in -- around 1883. Scottish miners. They left Scotland, landed in Pennsylvania. They were there about five years, and landed here in the spring of 1883, I believe. Six or seven months later, my father's father (cough) was killed in the Southfield mine. In South Wellington. My mother's people landed here from Nova Scotia 1883. They came here with quite a lot more from Nova Scotia, for the opening of Number One mine. Not too sure about this, but we were of the opinion that the grandfather came to help in the sinking of Number One shaft. But this is where it goes a little bit wrong. Cause Number One was sunk, started, in -- the shaft, in 1881. And the air shaft, for Number One air shaft, was about 1882. And they struck coal in Number One main shaft in 1883. This is when they were down around 600 feet, 650 feet. So the story that we've led to believe that he came here to sink Number One shaft, somewhere along the line, isn't quite right.

And my father's and grandfather's people his father was the first manager of the Princess Colliery in Sydney mines, Nova Scotia. So I am from a coal mining family. Now in my own family, there was seven of us, 6 boys and a girl, but I was the only one that worked in the mines. They couldn't keep me out, I mean, this is it, I was bred a coal miner, and I guess this was it. So from 1925, like I started in the Wakesiah, roughly 1940, I had 25 years of it, outside of layoff periods, when you'd have to work other places, in logging camps or in sawmills, or construction, practically all the time I worked in the mines.

On the surface for about two years. But practically all the time, underground.

Daughter: Tell her how old grampa was when he started in the coal mines.

IA: Now, my father -- like his father was killed there -- I think my father was eight years old when his father was killed. Well he was digging coal down Number One when he was 11 years of age. He was working right on the face. And he worked in the mines here all his life practically. Practically the only thing he did. He was on the first Draeger team that's mine rescue team when they brought in mine-rescue work, he was on the first team that came out of the rescue station, and he had through his life, quite an experience with, not only the fires down Number One, when him and the mine superintendent were the only two people left in the mine, and he had to carry the superintendent out. (cough)

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(Amex)

During the big strike, he was kep' out of the mines for four years. on account of his activites. And when the Reserve explosion took place in 1915, he was working for Kaiser at the time, paving Haliburton Street, and they sent for him, to go on the rescue team. and the old man tells the story that after the explosion he got a cheque from the company, and he says, Their books would never balance. Cause that cheque was never cashed. And in the 1915 explosion, my wife's father was one of the victims. So, basically, I am of a coal mining family!

MB: Question re brothers. None went into mining.

At the time I started to work, there's a lot of the felâows were taken out of school to go to work. I left school of my own accord. If I hadda wanted to keep going -- they wanted me to, but I said no dice! This is the surprising theing, you know, there's seven of them in the family, and father, he's workin' in the mines, ak makin' the going rate of pay, we never missed a meal. And we always had a new suit of clothes at Easter.

Daughter: What happened to the nickel you got on the 24th of May, that had to last you till Labour Day? We always were told about it!

Well we got 25 cents on the 24th of May which had to last till Labour Day, but

MB: That was the big day here then, was it?

IA: The 24th of May, yes.

MB: What did you used to do then?

IA: Everything. You know, the big day, it was held up on the cricket field. There'd be horse racin', foot racin', baseball games, parade in the morning, maybe a two day affair, we didn't always have the foot racing on the cricket field. You'd have it down on the green, down where the safeway is now. And they'd also have waterpole, and whatnot, you know. The 24th of May, that was a big day. That was a day when everybody came home.

MB: Did the miners have to work that day?

IA: Oh no! Now the 24th of May was the big day. Another big night was bonfire night.

Daughter: Oh Guy Fawkes night -- I can remember that!

IA: That was a big night for the kids. Down on the daisy field. There used to be a bonfire practically every back yard.

Daughter: We used to have Guys! -- You know I mean -- more than Hallowe'en I think, was bonfire night.

IA: Well Hallowe'en, we used to go round, the idea was, if you seen a fire half built, was to how could you pull it down, and get away with it! This was all part of the system!

MB: Your brother s must have known so much about coal mining that they didn't want to go into the mines?

Daughter: Gramma had a job all lined up for him in a bank! And then he started to run.

IA: Well no, I think it was just the system. It was just the way it happend. I was quite happy to go in the mines. The other ones didn't want to go, so they didn't go.

MB: They knew the danger from the mines?

My first job in the mine was on the picking tables. This was the job where the coal was dumped on to the screens we'd pick the rock out of the coal. And you worked. It was a dirty job. It was a shaker, in the Wakesiah. ~~And then the reason why this~~ The coal came off the cage and it went over the screen and it had to be cleaned. It was a different size, the coal, the lump coal would go into one car, and then the smaller coal would go into another car, and the slack would go into the third car. Well before it reached that far it'd be about -- well on Wakesiah there's only four, 2 on each side, picking the rock out. There was just a short screen. And you took the rock out and you threw it on the floor and then when its slack time you take it in the wheelbarrow and you take it to the dump, and get rid of it. And then -- and this is pretty well the system, you know, a kid starting. Maybe start on top, on the picking tables. And then you'd go underground.

Well the first job as a rule, when you go underground, would be running winch. Hoist. And then after being on the winch for six months or so, if the opening came, you'd go riding rope. And then from riding rope you go driving mule. And then eventually, if you stay there long enough, you can be working on the face, digging or . It was a strange thing, you know, like there was some, very few, people like me who were actually working in the face. The native born, the Canadian, once you got driving mule, you had a pretty hard job getting away from it. They could come out from the old country, you know, from England, Scotland, or where, the Slavians, come here and start at the face right away. But the man who was driving the mule, he was pretty well kept at that.

Why?

Well you know, the old country boys were afraid of the mules. Like you know. You're here, you're running winch, you're riding rope, and you go driving. It's all steps in the game. So by the time you got driving mule you knew what it was all about. Like everything else, there was a system to it.

ME: Mainly Canadians then who were mule drivers.

Yes, the ones who were started. You The young ones. --There was the odd one who -- it wasn't till after we organized -- and this happened in Number Ten, that we took a position that anybody starting Number Ten, digging, for every man starting digging, there had to be one or two men go off the haulage. To go digging. And this is the new rule we brought in, because the fellows know, they were check (?) on that. And you know, there was a difference in wages. But naturally a man wanted to get onto the highest-paying job.

MB: So then the coal came up above, and was it weighed?

IA: Yes. It went either -- down in number one the scales were at the shaft bottom. Now here's an important part -- in the Reserve, the scales were on the pithead. At Number Ten there was no weigh -- we were paid on a per car. It wasn't tonnage, it was by car. But in Number One Protection, the man loading coal would be 45 cents a ton, a long ton, which would be 22 hundred-weight, not English ton, I guess. And there would be dockage. So many -- I'm not sure just what the figures were for orders. But there would be so many, a hundred pound, or two hundred, knocked off the weight of that coal for rock. Now, in the Reserve, it was on contract digging, where you were pillar and stall work, the rate was -- 95 cents a ton, give or take a cent. A long ton. 300 pound dockage. So actually, to get paid for a ton of coal, you know, we consider 2000 pound a ton, eh, you'd be loading at least 2500 weight. ~~2500~~ 25 hundredweight.

MB: That was standard, was it, like you just got that 300 pound dockage.

IA: Yes, that was knocked off. Now, if we had, what they called the courtyard, then periodically they knocked a couple of cars aside and they'd be dumped. And if there was over 300 pound of rock in it, the car, --300 or 500, you lost the car. We called it the courtyard. They'd take one and be dumped, and they'd scrape all the rock out of it, and if it was -- I think it was 500 pound, --there was 300 pound dockage, that was standard. That came off of every car. But if they dumped a ~~kx~~ car, and you know, they checked it right away. 500 pound of rock, the digger lost the car. And they got the coal!

(laughter)

IA: Well, it's all part of the system. Now, there was no check weighmen. After we organized, we put a check weighman on the job. And the contract digger, he paid the check weighman's wages. Just what the rate was, I just forget now, it may have been two bits a day. Enough to cover his wages. But whether it made any difference to your tonnage or not I don't know.

MB: Was there any cheating?

IA: (slowly) Well, we always figured there was. We always figured there was short tonnage. But then I say, after they put a check weighman on, it didn't seem to make too much difference.

MB: What was the check weighman's job?

IA: Well he would stand there, and just watch the scales. He couldn't do a dam thing. He'd check the weighman. You know, the company weighman. And he'd fiddle around with the things, 22 hundredweight, 22 or whatever it was. And all the check weighman could do was stand there and watch him. Make him feel bad, I guess.

MB: Was there any way, like, your father, -- I suppose there was a lot more of that went on in those really early days? And they'd have no way of proving it either.

DA: No. Oh no. See like the system down Number One, the scales were down the shaft bottom. Well, a motor -- a trip of ~~xxxx~~^{coal}/would come out, they'd go over the ~~sax~~ scales -- well, the scale sheets -- and everybody had a tally, you know, the load of coal had a tally number, and you put the tally on the car. So maybe we were coming off shift or that, and you'd put your head in the weigh house and look at the tally sheet, they'd be all 1600, 1600, 1600. (laugh) You know, there was no way they could ~~ka~~ actually weight them properly. The cars were just going right over.

(Daughter) - tell them about - like you used to work on contract? And then there were people that got paid straight. By the hour. There were two different systems at work.

A: Yes. Well, like on the pillar and stall work again, which I was starting to go on about, the contract digger was 95 cents a ton. Less than four feet high, you got a dollar and eight cents a ton.

B: And you were down on your knees, I guess.

A: Yes, ~~you~~ they paid you more for it, but you worked a dam sight harder to get it. And you never made the same amount of coal. / (come down?) But then in Number Ten they had the system of -- ~~a~~ it was by the car, but Number Ten opened up, started, they started on the company ~~skiff~~ system. Six cars per man, in the place, two men working together, be twelve cars, and they'd get the six dollars a day for it, and this was -- and then that kep on for a ~~kx~~ certain period of time, then they went contract. And the contract was a dollar a car, plus timberin' and rock and I imagine at that time, the mine average for the contract diggers would be around nine dollars a day. Something like that. The highest they got -- then, during the war after a couple of strikes, we went from -- and wage increases were coming -- the company men were getting increases. The contract digger, instead of having (husband arrives) -- instead of the contract digger getting an increase on ~~the contract~~ / the contract, we got a bonus. And it ended up, we were getting about five and a quarter a day bonus. So around that time, the mine average for Number Ten mine would be roughly (hi!) a bit better than \$16 a day.

(Introduction &) -- Oh yes, we came over just after the Indians!

Daughter: My sister's husband's family came over on the Princess Royal, and before Linda and Ray got married, my grandmother was still alive, and Grandma could go through all these very involved, convoluted family / ~~xxxxxxx~~ trees, you know. But she got going on and finally Ray said, Would you just tell her to be quiet, we're going to find out we're cousins, if she keeps on at this rate!

Really, when you get some of the families that have been around for a long time, they were very stuck together.

MB: This is what I'm learning when I go around, and so far I've got the three Greenwells who married three Bowaters, --

D: They're cousins, you see, the Aitkens. My grandmother -- his mother, was a

all mixed up together. There was a Greenwell funeral about a month ago, Dad?

MB: Yes, we were there. Ellen Greenwell. We've known her about forty years, I guess.

D: But anyway, it just goes on and on forever.

MB: And now I go to Ladysmith and I find Mrs. Strang is related to Joe White and Bill Loudon, and Mrs. Howarth, well it's Mrs. Howarth really. And gee, people are so related, a way back there. Two Moores married two Bowaters, I guess, maybe two generations ago.

D: Yes, it's terrifically intertwined back there.

IA: Mrs. Moore, she'd be Harriet Bowater. --See, there was Auntie Ellen, Auntie Sarah, Auntie Cal, -- and Harriet, I think maybe Harriet came in there. She married a Moore. She'd be Neely Moore's nother. I think.

MB: Phoebe, she says she doesn't remember enough, and she says she was the youngest, so she doesn't want to be interviewed.

IA: And then there was Kitch Bowater, Bill Bowater, they were cousins to the Bowaters at Cedar, and old Neely Bowater, and Billie Bowater, they were brothers.

(End of interview) .